

A Theresienstadt Diary

This letter was written by Sophie Rosenfelder (Herman Stone's grandmother) after her release from Theresienstadt (Terezin) at the end of World War II.

It should be remembered that Theresienstadt was not a typical concentration or extermination camp. It was used by the Nazis as the "demonstration camp" to show neutrals that the Jews were not really being mistreated in the camps. As such, it was the only camp ever to be opened to inspection by the Red Cross. People that did not die there of so-called "natural causes" were shipped out of Theresienstadt to one of the notorious extermination camps.

This translation was prepared by Herman Stone in January, 1974. The translation is deliberately made as literal as possible, with no attempt made to elaborate, improve the literary style, or to develop a more chronological story.

Theresienstadt 1942-1945
Konradshofen August 21, 1945

My Dear Children and Grandchildren!

I feel the need to report to you on my life here in the ghetto. My leave-taking from home was very touching. On that day we had to go to a camp at Milbertshofen.

There they had very strict luggage control. My silken down comforter was taken from me. I was very unhappy. Stephan in his usual dear way gave me his. He had only a woolen blanket. Selma and Stephan [her youngest daughter and her husband] came voluntarily for my sake. I calmed down somewhat and really appreciated this sacrifice.

On the next day we were transported here [Theresienstadt] - it took 36 hours. On the train were only people from Munich, both acquaintances and strangers. We entertained each other quite well - it had the appearance of a pleasure trip. Then, in pouring rain we had to leave the train one station early and walk for one hour, carrying our baggage.

After a long wait we were finally led to our quarters; it was a barn and we had to sleep on the floor. It was hard and we were unused to it - but we were tired and slept. Waking up was worse! We pounded nails in the walls to hang our clothes. Three days later we received our bedrolls. The suitcases we never received at all. This of course was a great shock but we were helpless. The first days none of the food tasted good. Then came the hunger - and we ate. In the morning we had bad coffee, at noon bad lentil soup and potatoes. Occasionally we had a buchtel, this is similar to a rohrnudle [a kind of danish] . At night we again had coffee or soup. The food had to be picked up standing

in line; a very affecting sight. In the beginning we were accompanied; later we were permitted to go out alone.

Uncle Joseph [her brother], Fritz [another brother] and Anna [Joseph's wife] lived near us. We were together daily. Unfortunately Fritz was only here for six weeks and then died of a weak heart. Joseph died in November, of pneumonia. Sadly, I had to accompany both brothers to be buried in foreign soil.

Now we were permitted to go out. I went for walks but it was no pleasure. People sat in front of the houses looking old, fragile and unhealthy. The streets and yards were dirty, unkempt and there were no trees or flowers anywhere.

Theresienstadt is a garrison town with twelve barracks. Visiting a hospital is a shattering sight. The same goes for nursing homes- to see how primitively humans are cared for! The city has taken in 56,000 people. All nations are represented, all professions and trades. There are many pious, aware Jews here. Friday evening and Saturday there is a prayer service in the attic. One comes home from this a little bit calmer.

Selma has to work 8-10 hours in the labor exchange, Stephan in a technical office. I keep busy at home. People only have to work until they are 65 years old. We suffer and go hungry. The Holy Days came but there was no difference. Saturday and Sunday are work days.

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In October we finally had to move, into a nice house. We occupied a large room with fifteen ladies. Selma lived with me, Stephan in a barracks. We again had to sleep on the floor, but we had mattresses. Stephan bought a stove, we had warm water and were able to cook. I was elected room commandant but that is mainly an honorary title. One only had to see that there is quiet and order; besides that, to distribute the assigned food materials.

After two months I darkened the upper windows. I fell and broke my left arm. That night I was put into a plaster cast by a former surgeon and had to spend ten days in a sickroom. Day and night I had to suffer terrible pains. Then I came back to the house and was helpless, sad and miserable. Selma nursed me with much child's love. I became very run-down because of the poor nourishment. After six weeks the plaster cast was removed. An X-ray showed that the arm had healed. Then I still received sunlamp treatments and massage for several weeks. However, I was happy that I could again work and do everything.

Life here is difficult, ever more difficult, and the hunger is even worse. My love for you and trust in G-d gave me the strength to endure it all, else I

would have despaired. A difficult winter came. This too I overcame.

Finally, we received a sign of life from home. Max and Willy [her sons] sent packages. I cannot describe our joy.

The packages had to be picked up with a pass and at that place you could see hundreds of people with happy faces. It was a feast day. We pounced on it like hungry wolves. The contents were always so nicely chosen, good and put together with love. This was repeated diligently and we could use everything. Erna Eayer and Prex's [friends of Steinbergs] also occasionally sent us nice packages. Erna always included some money. We used that to buy bread because there was not enough.

Now we had it better. Selma obtained, with much trouble and use of influence [bribery] a trustee position as food commissioner. She had to distribute the food products and besides that to help in serving the meals. Because of that we always had enough. To all of our relatives and acquaintances she also gave enough. Many people from Munich and most of the Augsburgers were there.

Unfortunately already very many have died. Among them Fanny Reiter [cousin], Mrs. Rosenstiehl [friend] and three of my cousins. All Augsburgers and 90% from Munich. Daily there are about a hundred funerals. The rite is carried out in a mortuary by a rabbi and cantor according to Jewish tradition. The bodies were cremated. To stay healthy here is an extraordinary bit of luck.

The Jews have achieved astonishing feats. They have modernized the whole town with their energy and ability; they have laid out a railway and beautiful parks. Now came my 70th birthday [February 8, 1943.] Selma gave me a pullout bed. I felt like a queen. Besides that I received a cake and sweets as much as one can get here. Stephan gave me a poem, also in all your names.

In this way time passes. One lives but it is not a life. Everything is well organized here. Every day the doctor comes by and the nurse is handing out medicines. The laundry is done and is returned clean quickly. There is a repair shop for clothing, laundry and shoes. Every month we get 50 Ghetto Kronen. This can be used to buy things in the store. However there are only old, used things for sale.

There is also a coffeehouse. With one ration card, one can get black coffee and sugar. The decoration is like a big city and there is a good orchestra. One can also go to the cabaret. In summer this is held in the open, in bad weather in the attic. There are excellent artists here from all the large cities. Occasionally we go there - one has no real interest - but it provides a short period of forgetting.

The Czechs play an important role. They are capable, nicely dressed people. Most of the time they keep very much in the background. In the meantime another year has passed.

In the spring, Stephan obtained a big position as chief of the construction yard. The construction yard is a large plot of land which contains all the workshops and factories. It is a great responsibility. However, he also received a nicely furnished room and Selma could finally live together with him. I remained in the old place. Only those employed could stay there. They also had a little piece of garden for their use. I usually went there at nine in the morning and in the evening they brought me home. I cooked, sewed and prepared the meal and made the food better by the time they came home from work. I put together new recipes for potatoes and it always tasted good. One got filled up and lived like a human.

Unfortunately, this only lasted three quarters of a year. Then Stephan was transported to a work camp. A week later Selma went also. Even today, after seven months, I still do not know where. One had to give up the room and I was alone and abandoned, and continued to go hungry.

Packages from Germany were not permitted anymore. I was completely shattered. Only my yearning for you, my dear ones, gave me hope and strength. In the meantime my grandchildren have all grown up. They have probably forgotten their Oma. I do not believe that. They must feel how much I love them. My last wish is to see them all once more.

Then during the deepest part of the winter I had to move out. According to my wishes I went to the old folks home. This has its good and bad sides. There I am together with many other ladies. I got used to that too. Everybody had much to tell. I had never known that there is so much suffering, sorrow and misery. Again my birthday came. I was completely alone and glad when the day was over.

At the end of February, Willy arrived here. You cannot imagine my surprise and joy. We are together every day. He has a pleasant position in an office. However, he also brought me very sad news, that Max has been bombed out. Elly [Max's wife] is in Fischach with the little one [Max's youngest son.] Ilse [his daughter] is in Augsburg. Horst [his older son] is in Jena in a work camp.

Max is missing and up to today I could not find out anything. This is a great pain for a mother. I hope he is alive and again with his family. This too I have to bear and wait for. Again and again we ask dear G-d for relief.

Finally in the middle of May came the long-desired peace. The ghetto is now in Russian hands. For the other details there are no words in the German language. We do not know when we will get out of here. If possible, Willy

wants to take me with him. I am emaciated, old, weakened and poor. I wish for you that you should be spared such a fate.

Now I send you greetings and a thousand kisses.

Your loving mother and oma.

Post Script. Max and Willy survived. No trace of Selma or Stephan were found.